

From the Field: Sometimes All You Have To Do Is Ask

By Judy Riha, SB82 Mobile Triage Team Volunteer, assisting homeless in SA 4



I want to tell you a quick story:

I pulled into a gas station and ended up being touched by an event that I'll never forget.

As I was filling my gas tank, I glanced at a homeless man digging through some trash cans. Nothing unusual in that, I see it all time—but this man wore pants that exposed his rear end and the back of his legs all the way down to his knees. The pants were barely held together by the middle seam, and the cloth was thin and filthy. I looked down, sighed and felt terrible - powerless and sad – thinking of the oft

quoted mantra “There for the grace of God...etc., etc.”

A large van pulled up and I watched an orthodox Jewish man exit. I blurted out “Sir, do you have any clothes in your van that we could give to that man? Pants, a jacket, even a blanket – I feel so sorry for that guy.” “No, sorry – I don’t.” The man headed off to the gas station office, looking down, walking at a quick pace.

Another vehicle pulled up, and an older woman stepped out. I asked her the same question. “You know, I do have some clothes that I was going to donate. Here, let me get them.” She popped the trunk and pulled out some thick jeans, handed them to me, and started rummaging for a sweater.

“My son just passed away, that’s why I have all these clothes. They’ve been in my car for a few weeks... He was just 32, he was a quadriplegic – he was in an accident when he was 18. I took care of him.” We both paused for a few seconds...and the homeless man walked past us.

I called out to him: “Sir, can I give you these? Your pants have a hole in the back.” He reached back and acknowledged that he was exposed, smiling sheepishly.

He turned them over in his hands examining them, and then looked up at us.” Thank you.”

The woman answered: “I’m sorry that they’re a little too big, but I don’t have a belt.”

“No, no – it’s OK, I have this rope.”

“Oh, and here’s a sweater.”

“Hmm, that’s really thick... warm. Thank you.”

The woman handed him a pair of knee length shorts.

“Mmm, er. Ah....”

We could tell that he just wasn’t into the idea of shorts. But I told him that it was going to rain for the next few days, and that he could layer up if he got cold.

“OK.” He folded them and put him into his duffle bag.

“OK... so you should put the pants on soon, wrap up, it’s getting cold, plus you don’t want to get arrested.”

“Yes, I will. I will. Thank you. Thank you.” The man walked away nodding his head as he ducked down an alley.

The lady and I turned back to each other as she was about to close the trunk, and I saw a picture frame with a photo collage of her son, smiling under a head of beautiful red hair.

I told her that this will make a huge difference in the homeless man’s life, and that it honors her son’s memory. In the Jewish faith, a good act is called a mitzvah—a good deed. I told her that I would never forget this moment, and started welling up with tears. So did she and we hugged each other and introduced ourselves. We hugged again, once more, and she told me that she would never forget the moment either.

As I was driving away, I saw the Jewish man take a gas pump and begin to fill the gas tank for the lady. He had stopped rushing, and I guess he had heard our conversation.

So, just by asking – four people were changed from their normal life: The homeless man received fresh, warm clothes. The grieving woman saw that her son’s clothes went to a good cause. The Jewish man spoke to two women outside of his normal circle, and I’m sharing my experience with you.

We all make a huge difference in people’s lives, often without even knowing it. It’s the ripple effect: “the pebble hitting the surface of a pond ...”

Well, from one pebble to another – thanks for jumping into the water.